

The Pre-Civil Rights South

Life in the pre-civil rights South offered little opportunity and denied its black citizens many of the most basic human rights. Slavery had been abolished in the Confederate States by the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. The Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution (1870) gave all men—white and black—the right to vote. However, the Supreme Court’s decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) made segregation virtually the law of the land. In light of *Plessy*, it was not illegal to have separate facilities for black and white Americans as long as they were “equal.” This gave rise to the “separate but equal” notion. Unfortunately, “separate” was rarely “equal.”

In the 1940s, the decade in which *A Lesson Before Dying* takes place, the South was still governed by many of the laws enacted after Reconstruction. These statutes, known as Jim Crow laws, were designed to keep former slaves from achieving equality with their former masters. Louisiana, where Ernest J. Gaines was born and the novel is set, had the most such laws of any state.

Jim Crow laws prohibited miscegenation (intermarriage between different races) and made it punishable by harsh prison sentences and steep fines. Many laws made it difficult for blacks to exercise the right to vote, by requiring that they pay poll taxes they could not afford or take tests they could not pass. One of the most ludicrous laws in Louisiana required blind people of different races—who could not even see the color of each other’s skin—to be housed and treated at separate facilities. Neither white nurses nor white barbers were allowed to serve blacks. A black person

accused of any perceived offense to a white person was subject to intimidation, violence, and possible lynching by groups such as the Ku Klux Klan.

Jim Crow laws extended well outside the geographical area known as the Deep South. In Oklahoma, it was a misdemeanor for white teachers to teach at a school that accepted students of both races. Oklahoma also required separate facilities for swimming, fishing, and boating, in addition to separate phone booths. As late as 1948 even California, the state to which Grant’s parents have “escaped,” had laws outlawing marriage between the races.

A Lesson Before Dying is set just before the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum. In 1954 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled segregation of public schools unlawful by unanimous decision, after hearing the *Brown v. Board of Education* case. Rosa Parks was arrested on December 1, 1955, for refusing to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama, public bus to a white man. Martin Luther King, Jr., helped organize a bus boycott and was elected president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, making him the official spokesman for the boycott. Still, another decade passed before Congress ratified the Civil Rights Act of 1964, nullifying the country’s Jim Crow laws and ending legalized segregation.